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ABSTRACT

The rapid increase in the number of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students is especially significant in the nation's large urban school districts. The numbers of LEP students in special, bilingual education programs has exploded due to the constant stream of immigrants into the United States and the inability of so many children, even those who have already been in such bilingual education programs, unable to meet program exit criteria. The fact that a large number of continuing LEP students fail to exit ESL programs even after 7 years is a serious issue facing many urban school systems with limited resources. This paper explores what it means for all the students who remain permanently in LEP programs or continue to be labeled as such. What happens academically to these students, and what kind of futures they have is rarely addressed or seriously discussed in the field. It is concluded that while there are certainly other relevant factors affecting these long-term LEP students, there is evidence that continuing BE/ESL programs does not improve academic performance and that such learners usually lack higher order thinking skills necessary to perform well on norm and criterion-referenced assessments. Other conclusions are drawn and policy implications discussed. (KFT)

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--Results from a large urban school district--

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How Did Multiple Years (7+) In A BE/ESL Program Affect
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Background and Context

The rapid increase of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students is a reality in the US public schools, especially in large urban areas. In the Dallas Public Schools (DPS), the total LEP population increased 35% over the last five years and accounted for 36% of the District's total enrollment in 1999-2000. The secondary LEP population increased even faster and high school LEP students increased 71% in the last 6 years (Table 1).

While the increase of LEP students is widely acknowledged, a hidden reason related to the growth has rarely been discussed. New immigrant students are not the only cause for the increase in secondary LEP students. "Continuing LEP students," those who have been in a BE/ESL program for 7+ years, unable to meet exit criteria, contribute to a large portion of the secondary LEP population (Figure 1). In the Dallas Public Schools, nearly half of its secondary LEP population has been in the program for seven or more years. The majority of them are US-born. (Figure 2).

One key issue concerning BE/ESL programs is the length of time needed for LEP students to become English proficient. In recent years, studies (e.g., Collier 1995, TEA, 2000) on second language acquisition suggested that it normally takes at least 5-7 years for non-native speakers to reach academic/cognitive English proficiency or "typical native-speaker performance." By then, "students being schooled in a second language reach deep enough proficiency level in a second language to compete at the typical level of native speaker performance, expressed on a standardized test as 50th percentile or normal curve equivalent (NCE)" (Collier, 1995).

On the surface, the "5-7 year" theory gave a justification/interpretation to what has been observed in urban districts (accumulation of a large number of continuing LEP students). It is argued, by quoting the theory, that half of LEP students remain in BE/ESL programs for seven or more years is just a natural process; it will take that many years for LEP students to achieve English proficiency.

Yet, careful reading of Collier's study would differentiate what is described in the study and what is happening in many urban school districts. As the authors stated, the results of their findings were based on "well-implemented, mature programs" which include two-way developmental bilingual education (BE), one-way developmental BE and transitional BE, including ESL taught through academic content (Collier and Thomas, 2000). The well-implemented, quality bilingual programs are rarely found in large urban districts due to the lack of bilingual teachers. Simply put, the lack of qualified bilingual teachers in many urban districts constrained the implementation of quality bilingual programs. What is actually implemented, to a large extent, are transitional ESL programs with traditional methods, which were referred to as "ineffective" in Collier's studies.

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The fact that a large number of continuing LEP students failed to exit ESL programs even after seven or more years is not justifiable. It is a serious issue facing many urban high schools and concerned by parents, teachers, administrators and students. What are the consequences of being continually identified as "LEP" and placed in an ESL program for multiple years? What has happened academically to these students? These questions, which affect many LEP students' future, have been rarely addressed or seriously discussed.

Table 1

Number of Secondary LEP Students in the DPS by Years LEP, 1995-96 to 1999-2000

School Year	Number of Years Being LEP							Total N
	1	2	3	4	5	6	[redacted]	
1994-95	1,399	1,702	1,189	588	530	3,015	NA	8,423
1995-96	1,999	1,189	1,585	1,090	509	518	**3,489**	10,379
1996-97	1,391	1,767	1,110	1,449	992	462	**4,440**	11,611
1997-98	1,203	1,314	1,605	990	1,197	838	**5,058**	12,205
1998-99	1,351	1,113	1,254	1,513	931	1,048	**6,096**	13,306
1999-00	1,560	1,288	1,013	1,174	1,330	839	**7,185**	14,389

Figure 1. Number of Identified LEP Students in Grades 7-12 by Years Being LEP, 1995-96 to 1999-2000.

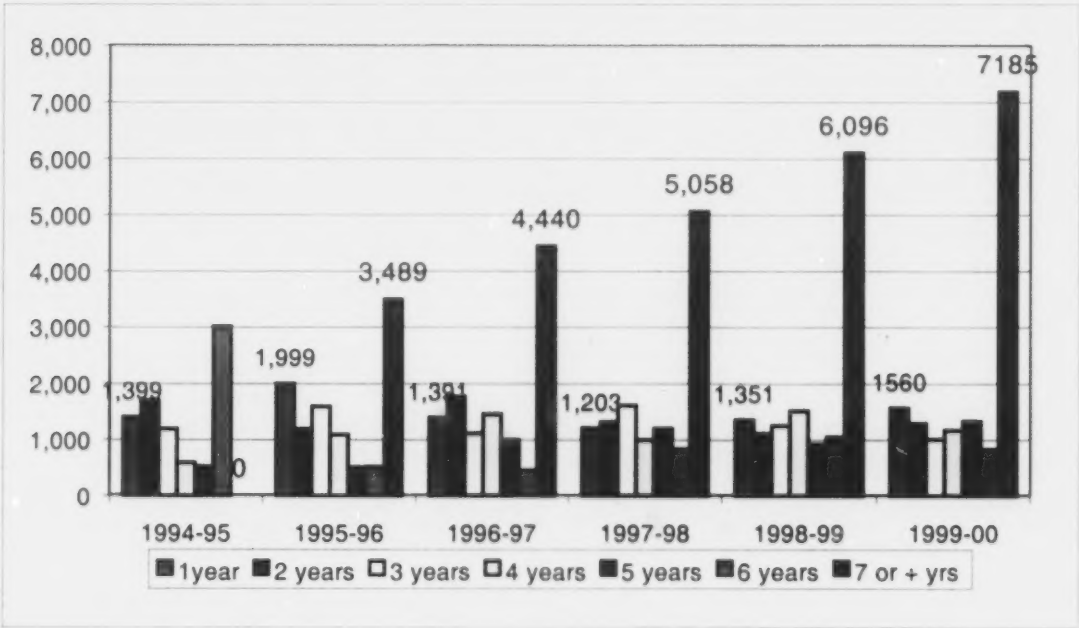

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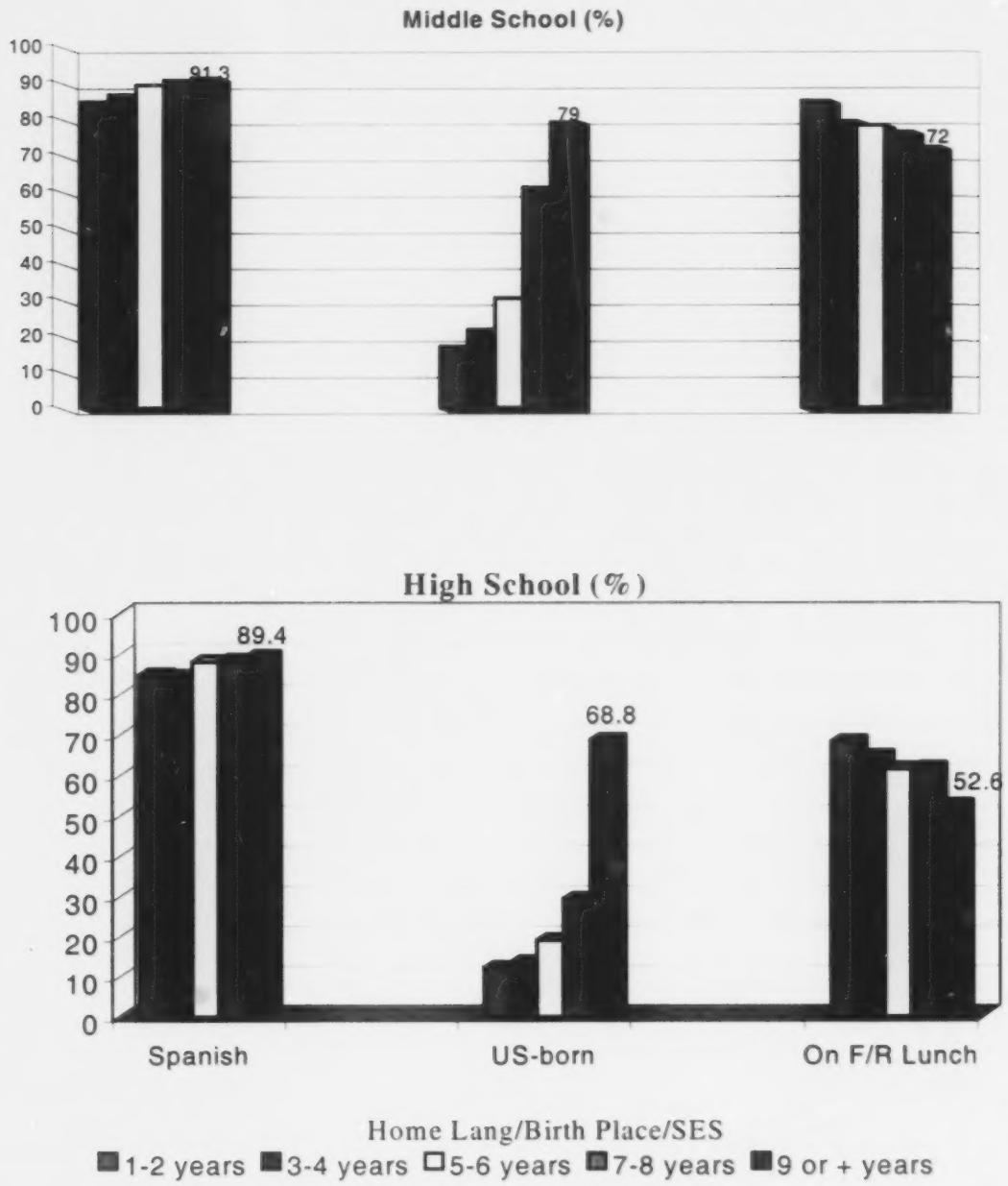
Figure 2. Percent of Served DPS Secondary LEP Students Broken Down by Years in the BE/ESL Programs: Spanish as Home Language, Birth-Place and on Free/reduced Lunch Programs (1999-2000)



Research Questions

With performance data on the DPS secondary LEP students' English proficiency and academic achievement for the last two years, the study focused on the following questions:

1. What is the growth pattern of LEP students' English proficiency level by number of years in a BE/ESL program? Did the English proficiency level continue improving as LEP students stayed longer in the program?
2. What is the growth pattern of LEP students' general academic performance level by number of years in a BE/ESL program? Did multiple years (7+) in a BE/ESL program positively affect the academic achievement of LEP students? By and large, did the extended length of time spent in a BE/ESL program help LEP students move forward academically?
3. What is the relationship between LEP students' growth in English proficiency and their general academic performance? What are the possible instructional factors that are related to the results?

Methods and Data

Four assessments were used to measure the academic performance of LEP students in the DPS during the last two years.

- Woodcock-Munoz Language Survey (WMLS) was used to measure LEP students' English proficiency level. WMLS is primarily a measure of cognitive-academic language proficiency (CALP). The 20-minute long test contains two major parts: Oral test (picture vocabulary and verbal analogies) and Literacy test (reading and writing).

  A broad ability level, or an overall CALP level, is obtained when the Oral and Literacy parts are combined. The broad ability levels, indicating English proficiency levels of students, range from WMLS 1 (negligible English), WMLS 2 (very limited English), WMLS 3 (limited English), WMLS 4 (fluent English), to WMLS 5 (advanced English). The original WMLS data were re-scaled into broad ability W-Score (W-Score of 500 ≈ 5^{th} grade national norm).

  LEP students are required to take WMLS upon enrollment and then once a year in the spring. The spring test results were used to assess the student's annual growth in English proficiency. Both end-of-the-year proficiency level and annual progress were examined.

- Two standardized tests (ITBS in spring 1999 and Stanford 9 in spring 2000) and one criterion-referenced test (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills--TAAS) were used to measure the general academic achievement.

Data were extracted from the DPS LEP student database in May 1999 and May 2000 and were analyzed using frequency procedures from the SPSS statistical package. Test data were broken down by number of years LEP students enrolled in the BE/ESL programs. The study focused on secondary LEP students because the majority of continuing LEP students were found at the secondary school level.

Drop-out data of LEP students by years in the program are included. Qualitative data collected from the field (observation and interview) were used when interpreting the test results.

Results of Study

1. What is the growth pattern of LEP students' English proficiency by number of years in a BE/ESL program?

Spring 1999 and Spring 2000 WMLS results show the following patterns:

- There is a continuing growth of LEP students' English proficiency level when they stay longer in the program (Figure 3);
- A very small proportion of LEP students were able to reach fluent English (WMLS 4) even after studying in the BE/ESL program for an extended number of years--Continuing LEP students reach a ceiling of WMLS 3 (Figure 3).
- Positive pre-post gains indicate that all LEP students made some annual progress in English proficiency (Table 2);
- However, only those in the program for 1-2 years made sufficient progress to exceed expected standard gains (Table 2).

Figure 3. English Proficiency Levels (WMLS) of Secondary LEP Students by Years Served (Spring 1999 and Spring 2000)

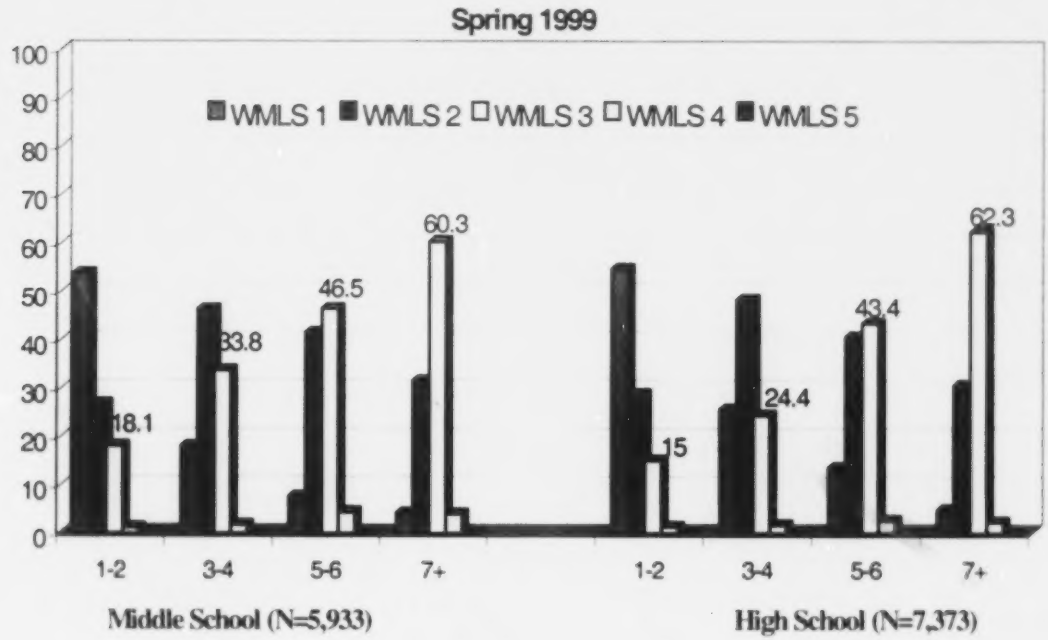


Figure 3 (continued).

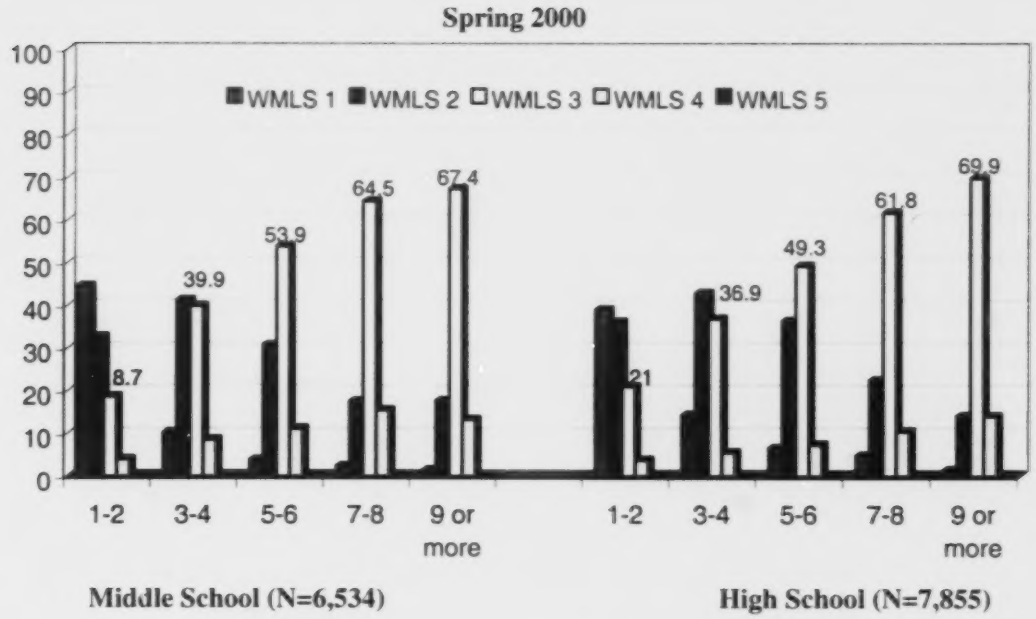


Table 2
Served LEP Students' WMLS Annual Progress Using Pre/Post
Mean W-Score by Years in BE/ESL, 1999-2000

Years served	Tested N	Spring, 99 Mean	Spring, 00 Mean	Gain Mean	Standard Gain	Gap from SD Gain
			Grades 7-8			
1-2	829	436	468	31.4	18.6	12.8
3-4	675	472	482	10.3	13.0	-2.7
5-6	704	482	488	6.2	10.6	-4.4
7-8	**963**	**486**	**491**	**5.0**	**9.8**	**-4.8**
9+	**1,398**	**488**	**492**	**4.6**	**9.4**	**-5.2**
			Grades 9-12			
1-2	1,071	450	476	25.6	17.5	8.1
3-4	1,096	482	489	6.9	10.8	-3.9
5-6	901	490	494	4.3	9.0	-4.7
7-8	**514**	**495**	**499**	**3.7**	**4.9**	**-1.2**
9+	**1,547**	**499**	**502**	**3.1**	**6.7**	**-3.6**

Note: Standard gain refers to the expected one-year gain for each respective "Pre" WMLS W-score. The expected gains were provided by the authors of the WMLS.

2. What is the growth pattern of the general academic achievement of LEP students' by number of years in a BE/ESL program?

Data from two standardized tests (ITBS in spring 1999 and Stanford 9 in spring 2000, grades 7-9) and one criterion referenced test (TAAS) indicate the following trends:

- Despite mixed results, the academic achievement level of secondary LEP students indicated by ITBS, Stanford 9, Figure 4) and TAAS (Figure 5) failed to show a consistent pattern of continuing growth, as they stayed longer in the ESL program. That is, there was no positive relationship between LEP students' performance on ITBS, Stanford 9 or TAAS and the length of years in program.

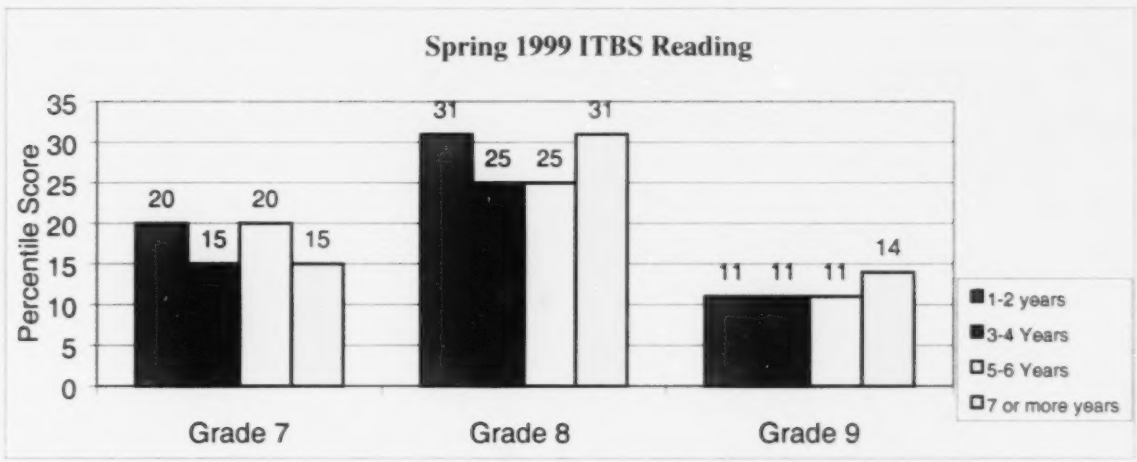
- An explanation for the low median percentile scores for continuing LEP students is that since exiting the ESL program is based on standardized scores, LEP students scoring above 40th percentile exited the program. The remaining students would then, by definition, have lower median percentile scores. While this theory is true in general sense, it does not explain the following facts. First, continuing LEP students who stayed in ESL program for 7+ years is not a small number. Since only less than 10% of LEP students met the exit criteria annually, accumulated continuing LEP students in our study account for nearly half of the secondary LEP population. Second, when continuing LEP students were compared to their counterparts who were in the program for fewer years (Figure 4, Part 2), their scores were not higher. For instance, the median percentile Stanford 9 reading scores for this group was 15 in 1999 and 16 in 2000 (grade 7, 24% of the total 7th grade LEP students), not higher than other groups of students.

- A larger issue is the overall low performance of urban students as a whole. The median percentile scores for non-LEP students in the DPS were only slightly higher than their LEP counterparts, also below the 40th percentile. In Spring 2000, the Stanford 9 reading median percentile score for grade 7 LEP students was 18, relative to 30 for non-LEP students; in grade 8, it was 20 for LEP students and 37 for non-LEP students; in grade 9, the comparison was 18 vs. 39. The results underline a disturbing reality in many urban school districts: as a weak part in a weak system, the BE/ESL programs is often affected by the low quality of the mainstream program. In other words, the overall low performance of urban school students complicates the education of LEP students in these districts.

- It is the lack of the academic/cognitive ability, or higher-order thinking skills, that hindered the academic progress of continuing LEP students. TAAS objectives that measure higher-order thinking skills obtained the lowest mastering rates by continuing LEP students (Table 3). Continuing LEP students, most of them in the group of WMLS 3, had particularly low passing rates on the items measuring vocabulary mastery (word meaning) and higher order skills (inference, generalization, summarization), compared to non-LEP students. English vocabulary is the primary impediment to improved English reading comprehension. Data emphasized the importance of teaching vocabulary and higher-order thinking skills to improve LEP students' general academic performance.

- Results of a study tracking 9th grade LEP students (N=81) who dropped out of school in 1998-99 indicate, 61 (75%) of them had been identified as LEP students and enrolled in the BE/ESL program since kindergarten. Data show the vast majority of 9th grade LEP dropouts are continuing LEP students who have spent their entire school life in the BE/ESL programs.
- Results of a correlation study (using DPS LEP grades 3-6 student performance data) indicate that at the elementary school level the number of years LEP had a significant negative correlation with TAAS reading performance (Urrabazo, 2001).

Figure 4. Median Percentile Scores for Secondary LEP Students by Years Served



Spring 2000 Stanford 9 Reading Comprehension

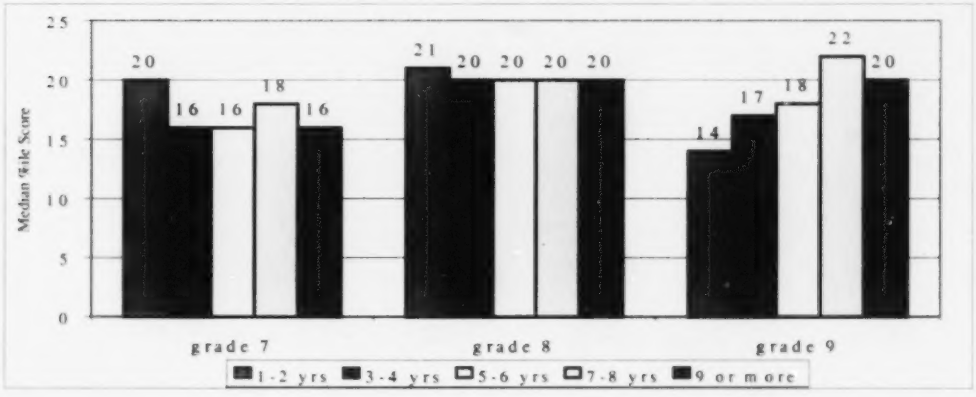
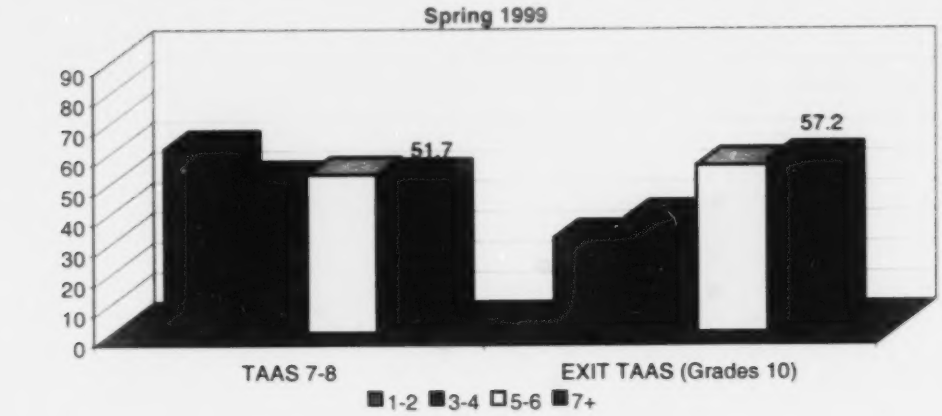


Figure 5. Percent of Secondary LEP students Passing TAAS Reading By Years Served



Spring 2000

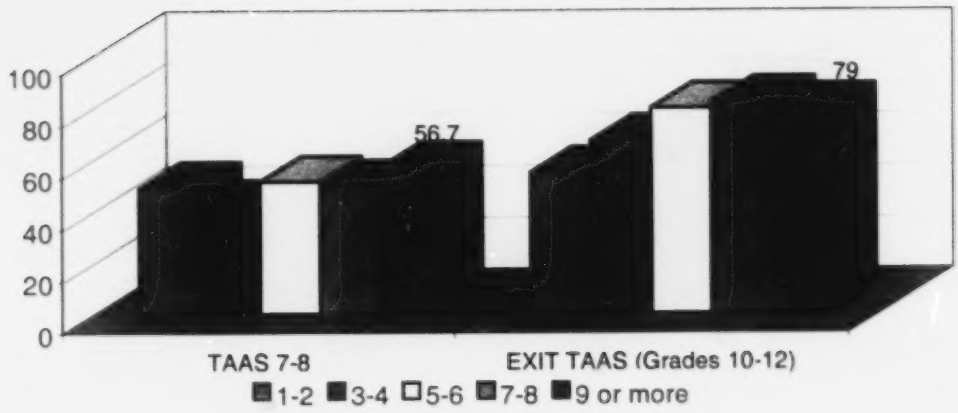


Table 3
Percent Mastering Each TAAS Objective by WMLS Level
Spring 2000

Mastery by TAAS objectives (%)	Non-LEP	**Served LEP total**	Served LEP by WMLS Level 1	2	[redacted]	4/5
		Grade 7-8				
Overall passing (%)	75.1	51.2	4.8	18.0		80.8
Word meaning	71.4	51.8	17.5	28.1		72.6
Supporting ideas	77.1	62.7	11.1	35.5		83.6
[redacted]	66.9	42.4	6.3	16.6		67.6
Relationships, outcomes	73.4	52.2	11.1	24.1		74.7
[redacted]	57.8	32.1	1.6	8.9		53.9
[redacted]	68.7	44.8	3.2	21.4		67.6
		EXIT TAAS (Grade 10 Only)				
Overall passing (%)	89.7	58.6	25.0	35.0		87.0
[redacted]	84.5	45.3	31.3	31.5		66.0
Supporting ideas	94.6	87.8	68.8	83.4		94.4
Summarization	82.1	55.4	24.0	38.6		77.8
Relationships, outcomes	82.6	59.3	36.5	45.7		80.9
[redacted]	57.7	14.9	8.3	7.4		34.6
[redacted]	74.5	38.0	19.8	21.4		67.9

Note: The vast majority of continuing LEP students stayed with WMLS 3 and failed to reach WMLS 4.

3. What are the potential instructional factors that are related to the lack of academic progress of continuing LEP students?

Many factors, social, economic, family, environmental, as well as school, have an impact on the academic progress of LEP students. While most of these are out-of-school factors, there are instructional elements that are directly linked to the educational opportunity of LEP students and their performance. Data from school visits and classroom observations revealed the following potential instructional factors.

- Inappropriate course assignment. A large number of continuing LEP students were inappropriately assigned to the beginning level ESL courses (set up for new immigrant students) or remedial language courses while they should have been assigned to sheltered English courses (Figure 6). This pattern was especially apparent in middle schools. Over 40 percent of the 4th year LEP students were enrolled in ESL 1-3 course. More than 10% of continuing LEP students (several hundreds) are still

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assigned to beginning level ESL courses even after they have been in the BE/ESL programs for seven, eight, nine or more years.

The course-taking patterns in high school are rather different from middle school. There is an accelerated transition of LEP students from ESL courses to sheltered English course as they stay longer in the program. By year 4, less than 10% of LEP students are enrolled in beginning level ESL courses (compared to 43% in middle schools). LEP students' performance on TAAS and Stanford 9 were consistently associated with courses they were enrolled. More information concerning the course taking patterns can be found in a related paper by presented in this year's AERA (Yang, 2001).

- Lack of rigorous content coverage in ESL courses. Classroom observations indicate a lower level of coverage on the higher order reading and writing objectives among ESL teachers than sheltered English teachers. The results could be related to the lack of a stable and standard ESL curriculum, the lack of ESL textbooks and teaching materials, and the lack of English certification among a large number of ESL teachers.

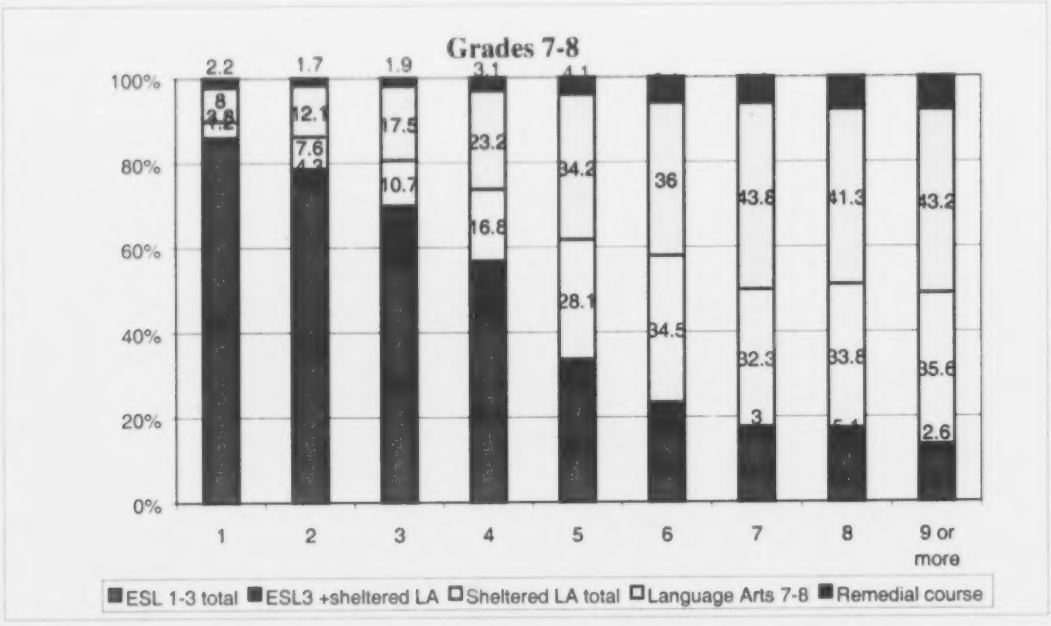
- Unrealistic exit criteria from the ESL program. With the state required ESL program exit criteria (40^{th} percentile on a norm-referenced test, or passing TAAS and obtaining WMLS 4), the annual exit rate in the DPS was below 10%. Therefore, a large number of LEP students are retained in the ESL program, unable to reach the exit criteria (Note that the median percentile scores for non-LEP students in the DPS are below 40^{th} percentile). Under the frustration of failure to reach the unreasonably strict exit criteria, many continuing LEP students are tired of being labeled "LEP" and lose interest in school. They have a higher tendency of dropping out of the school.

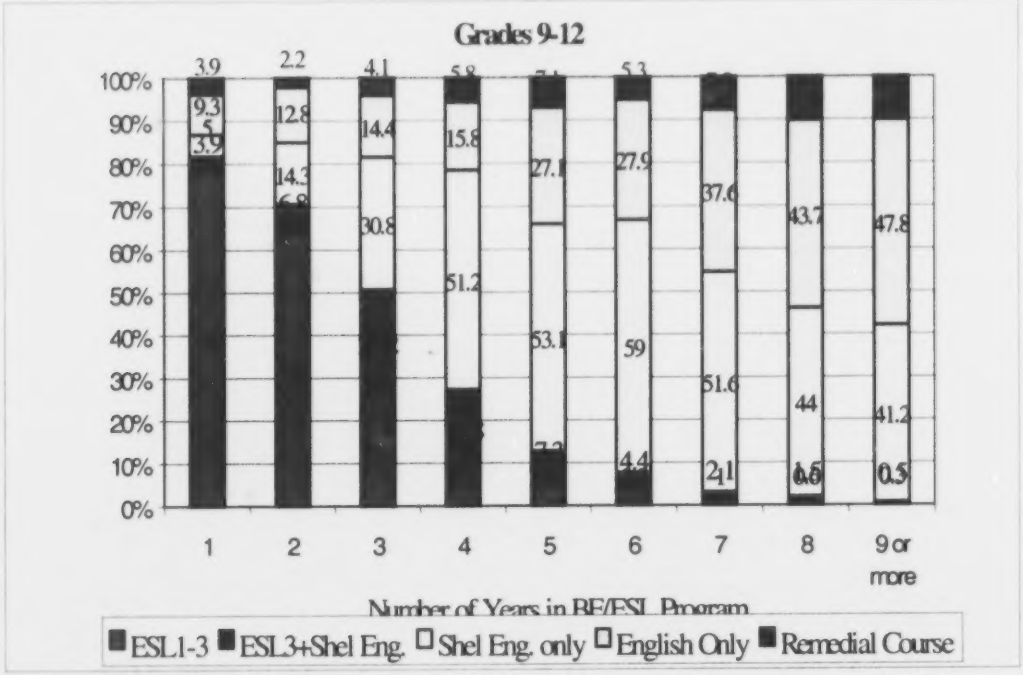
- Lack of consistent program implementation across school levels and schools. Inconsistent and unstable BE/ESL programs across schools and grade levels contribute to the lack of academic progress of continuing LEP students.

- Lack of communication between feeder schools and receiving schools. Some students were assigned into the beginning level ESL courses (ESL 1) when they enter middle school even though they have spent the entire elementary school in the BE/ESL programs. A high mobility rate among LEP students complicates the problem.

- Lack of cooperation between ESL teachers, sheltered English teachers and general education English teachers. The departmental boundary separated teachers in the ESL department and in the English department and made the communication and cooperation among them difficult.

Figure 6. ESL/English Course Taking Pattern by Years in BE/ESL, 1999-2000





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Conclusions

- Continuing LEP students account for a large portion of the secondary LEP population. The majority of these students are US born.
- BE/ESL programs positively affect the English proficiency growth of continuing LEP students. However, DPS secondary LEP students reach a ceiling of *WMLS* 3 (limited English proficient).
- Continuing LEP students' general academic performance does not improve as they remain 7+ years in BE/ESL.
- Students with 7+ years in a BE/ESL program lack the higher order thinking skills necessary to perform well on norm and criterion-referenced assessments.
- Several instructional factors, including inappropriately assignment of continuing LEP students in beginning ESL courses and remedial language courses, unreasonable exit policies, and the lack of rigorous content coverage in ESL courses could all influence the results.

Policy Implications

- Continuing LEP students, an academically at-risk student group, is a prevalent issue affecting many secondary schools. While it is important to know how long it takes for LEP students to achieve English proficiency in an effective BE/ESL program, it is equally important to understand the impact that being a continuing LEP student could bring to the academic achievement of the student. The issue of continuing LEP students, its context, cause, consequence, and approaches to solve the problem, should not be downplayed or ignored by policy makers and researchers in the field of second language acquisition and bilingual/ESL education. This issue directly affects the future of many young people.
- In large urban school districts, the issue of urban education and issue of BE/ESL education are often mixed. The difficulties in educating LEP students is compounded by the education of economically disadvantaged minority students. More often than not, the failure of LEP students' continuing progress in academic/cognitive English is not only attributable to the BE/ESL program but to the poor performance of the urban district students as a whole.
- By understanding continuing LEP students and identifying their academic weaknesses, policy makers and managers of ESL programs should investigate the instruction-related factors related to the issue and improve the treatment of this unique sub-population of LEP students.
- Instructionally, it is crucial to cognitively challenge continuing LEP students and no longer focus merely on acquiring English. ESL program curriculum needs more vigorous content knowledge and to be aligned to the mainstream curriculum.
- There is a need for a holistic approach, making the BE/ESL programs an integral part of the whole school system. The ESL department should be merged with the English department to make ESL, sheltered English and general education English an integrated whole to best serve LEP students. This would smooth the transitions of

LEP students from one course to another by breaking the departmental boundary, ensuring the cooperation between the three kinds of teachers, and systematically monitoring the quality of a variety of courses and course combinations.

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